

The Oregonian

Poll: Restore scorched forests

A survey finds three-quarters of Oregonians favor the logging of wildfire areas and planting of seedlings, an issue long debated

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Some three-quarters of Oregonians want federal forests restored after severe wildfires such as the 2002 Biscuit blaze by logging burned trees and replanting slopes with seedlings, a new poll has found.

The June survey of 607 registered voters across the state centered on how fast and how far land managers should go to replace scorched stands. It's a long-standing issue in Oregon: The Tillamook Burn decades ago prompted a massive restoration effort, but recent work has been slowed by debate over whether logging burned lands does more harm than good.

The poll was sponsored by a group with a strong position on the issue but was conducted by the independent Portland polling company Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall Inc.

It comes ahead of expected moves in Congress -- led by two Oregon lawmakers -- to push more rapid forest recovery. Some fear that could limit environmental and court reviews often blamed for delays.

The issue has been driven by planned salvage logging, planting and other projects that remain unfinished following the Biscuit fire, which swept over 500,000 acres in Southern Oregon three years ago. Environmental groups have fought logging in protected older forests and roadless areas.

The limited logging leaves the government with less timber revenue to pay for replanting and reclamation.

Rep. Greg Walden and Sen. Gordon Smith, Oregon Republicans, are crafting legislation to give land managers a freer hand after wildfires or other catastrophic events. Walden, who heads the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, will attend a hearing in Colville, Wash., today to discuss the issue.

A spokesman for Smith said the Biscuit delays have been "a very big lesson that post-fire recovery efforts are in crisis right now."

The new poll was sponsored by the Roseburg group Communities for Healthy Forests, which advocates more rapid reclamation of burned lands. Executive Director Sue Kupillas said many people are surprised more burned areas are not replanted to speed forest recovery.

The group is funded through private donations and federal money channeled through county governments for forest-related education.

The survey did not delve into a central Biscuit issue: How much logging of charred trees is appropriate on undeveloped lands such as roadless areas. Cutting makes way for faster replanting and regrowth, but environmentalists argue intensive salvage and replanting can replace diverse forests with unnatural tree farms.

Many findings were not startling. Nine of 10 Oregonians said that protecting forests from catastrophic wildfires, protecting fish and wildlife habitat and providing forest industry jobs is either very important or somewhat important.

But other results -- not always tied to forests -- stood out:

The timber industry is seen more favorably than environmental organizations often at odds with the industry. The timber industry was viewed favorably by 67 percent of Oregonians, and unfavorably by 19 percent. Environmental groups were viewed favorably by 53 percent and unfavorably by 30 percent.

The Oregon Legislature received the most unfavorable rating of any group by far. About 45 percent viewed it somewhat or very unfavorably.

Oregonians valued forests most highly because they help protect water quality, with 99 percent citing that as an important factor. Economic factors such as tax revenues were also important, but less so.

About three in four strongly or somewhat support restoring federal forests after wildfires by removing dead trees and planting seedlings. More than half said fires are growing out of control and cause too much damage, and everything possible should be done to restore burned forests.

Most did not buy arguments against logging burned lands. For instance, 56 percent thought it was a poor argument to say forests should be left alone because fires have occurred for centuries and more damage would be done by equipment and road construction.

The margin of error was 4 percent.

Conservation groups say it's the kind of restoration that is most important. If the goal is to prevent future fires, it's more important to remove smaller tinder than the large, more fire-resistant trees timber companies like to cut, said Francis Eatherington of Umpqua Watersheds in Roseburg.

"We would support restoration to a certain extent after fires, and replanting has a place," she said. "It's a question of what kind of restoration. Is it the type of restoration that benefits the forest, or is it the type of restoration that benefits the timber industry."

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